
Rev. Dr. HOWARD AGNEW JOHNSTON'S
SERMON AT THE SEVENTY-SECOND ANNIVERSARY
OF THE
AMERICAN SEAMEN'S FRIEND SOCIETY.

ANNUAL SERMON

BEFORE THE

American Seamen's Friend Society,

AT ITS

SEVENTY-SECOND ANNIVERSARY,

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BY THE

REV. HOWARD AGNEW JOHNSTON, D.D.,

IN THE

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S E R M O N .

Which hope we have as an anchor of the soul, both sure and steadfast, and which entereth into that within the veil.—Hebrew vi: 10

Just two years ago this nation, suddenly, unexpectedly, leaped into the place of a great world power. The achievement which brought us this condition was the victory at Manila Bay. A few days later the West Indies witnessed another victory of our arms, and the world realized that the concert of Europe must reckon with the United States of America. Now the result which immediately followed was a widespread interest in our equipment as a naval power. Leagues of ocean had come into the track of our empire, and we must meet the problem of enlarged shipping facilities, enlarged naval outfit, enlarged instruments necessary for mastery in the realms of commerce and government. In the nature of things every institution which has for its object the welfare of the men who travel on the sea has come into a place of larger importance than it occupied before. All the problems which we have found confronting us involve the men who man our ships, our transports, our great battle-ships, and all the small craft of every sort. We have one of these institutions represented here to-day. The AMERICAN SEAMEN'S FRIEND SOCIETY has entered its seventy-second year of service in this sphere of helpfulness. The importance of its work is greater to-day than it has ever been. Any scheme which Christian people may encourage and help with the hope that it will tend to uplift this world of ours to the level of a Christian civilization must take into account the men who bind the ends of the earth together as they travel hither and thither, touching the ports of the world. For this purpose this Society is organized. It strives to help those men who are beyond the reach of the churches as such, by serving as an arm of the Church, throwing about them the helpful influences of the Spirit of Jesus Christ.

The ultimate aim of this Society has suggested to me the text which I have chosen to-day. It is to guide every man whom it may

influence to that knowledge of Jesus Christ which will secure unto him that anchor of the soul, the hope of everlasting life through the atoning work of Christ the Saviour. To this theme, therefore, I ask your attention. There is a mixing of figures in the two images combined in the passage, but none the less vivid is the eternal truth which shines in them with richness and beauty, like gems in the setting of a precious thought. In the first figure the soul is the ship, the world the sea, the eternal happiness of the redeemed the haven toward which the vessel is bound. Hope is the anchor of the ship, while the encouraging consolation, through the promise and confirmation of the living God, is the cable which holds the ship to the anchor. The second figure is drawn from the temple of Jerusalem, with its courts and holy sanctuary. This world is the fore-court, and heaven the holy of holies, whither Christ the High Priest has gone before us, that we may follow in that new and living way which He hath consecrated with His own blood, which entereth within the veil. The one touch of inspiration completes for us thus the necessary complement of anchor and anchorage. The one is the Christian hope, the other is the Christian's glorified Redeemer, at the right hand of the throne of God, ever living to make intercession for us.

This expression "the veil" should hold our attention for a moment. It indicates that which is hidden from the mortal eye, yet it also tells us of the very nearness of that which is unseen. The veil which separates the soul from the life beyond is the condition which marks our limitations in this body of flesh. How thin and frail is the partition of a veil! Though its tissue be fine, and its fabric delicate, the breezes waft it, the touch of a child may rend it, the silent action of time will moulder it away. So is it with this earthly habitation of our souls. Though wonderfully and fearfully made, it is wrought out of frail mortality. In a bound, in a twinkling of the eye, in the throb of a pulse, in the flash of a thought, we may pass into the immortal and eternal. Death is but the drawing aside of the veil. We step within and the places which once knew us know us no more. The splendors of the eternal world burst upon us; we peer into the mysteries which the mortal could not comprehend, and take our inevitable stand at the judgment bar of God. It is only a step between the two parts of the one life. It is only a veil between us and the eternal destiny of our immortal souls.

No thoughtful man can ponder such truth as this without raising

the question: "How is it faring with my soul?" The text is the Christian's answer to that question. It breathes a confidence concerning the future which arrests the attention. And the query naturally arises: "What is the explanation of such confidence as this in the human heart?" That explanation is found in the second figure in the text. The Christian's anchor takes on meaning in view of his anchorage. Now this means that the mere element of hope in the human heart is not enough for our salvation. The character of that hope, the object of that hope must be taken into account. It would be impossible to overrate the importance of the place of hope in human life. Every clime and country, every age of the world, every condition of society, every individual soul, has known the meaning of that precious presence. It cheers us alike in the morning and noon and closing hours of earth's day. It builds castles upon a promise, suggests a remedy for every evil, plans a way of escape for every danger, imagines a surcease for every sorrow. Hope gives strength to the weary, courage to the despondent, joy to the desolate, life to the dying, and upon the tombs of those whose departure we mourn it hangs the unfading garland of a blessed immortality. And so it is true that in varying degrees this blessed boon is universal property.

And yet the writer of this epistle evidently meant to claim that the Christian's hope possesses a peculiar quality which lifts it above the ordinary hopes common to all men. When the apostle Paul speaks of some men being "without hope and without God in the world," he evidently means to say theirs is not an abiding hope. And the teaching is clear that the reason the Christian's hope is of supreme value is because it anchors the soul in Jesus Christ, who hath brought life and immortality to light, who links the life of earth on to the life of heaven, and lifts the redeemed into the peace of God now and forevermore.

It is not my purpose at this time to argue the validity of this claim that Jesus Christ is the world's only Saviour. The text is not intended so much to be an argument, as it is meant to be a testimony. The writer is speaking out of an experience in which he has found Christ's salvation. The figure in the text involves the truth that this life is one fraught with storms and breakers. That was the situation among the people to whom this epistle was written. They were in the midst of persecution because of their faith, and their lives were marked by hardships and privations and disappointments. The

writer was seeking to help them to be strong in the midst of these conditions, and his words apply as aptly to us to-day. There come billows of sorrow and misfortune, breakers of disappointment and discontent, blasts of sin, winds of temptation, like the resistless sweep of a hurricane, like the scorching breath of a sirrocco from an arid desert, in whose path are the marks of desolation and death. And this text is a testimony which breathes the actual experience of souls that have found their hope in God through Jesus Christ to be a sufficient anchor to hold them through the fiercest storms, holding them in the night of sorrow until the break of day, holding them through a struggle against sin until the tempter has been conquered, holding them even when they forget their anchor in the stress of the tempest, until they realize in time that it was this that sustained them through it all. This is the actual experience of many a soul, and this one incontrovertible fact is worth a thousand theories.

And the text means to teach that some people have this hope in Christ while others do not. Have you never seen these two classes of people? For two years of my college days I was a member of the jail committee of the Y. M. C. A. in the city of Cincinnati, and I have sat beside the prisoner on his little iron bed, when his life has been clouded in the gloom of unmistakable despair. Remorse was biting back into his soul, and he grasped like a drowning man at a straw, crying for light in the darkness. He had no faith which laid hold on God in Jesus Christ, as the loving Father who will forgive the sins of penitent men, and not having that he was without hope and without God in the world. Moreover, the saddest fact about such a condition of life is that it may be too late to bring help to such a soul. And that fact leads me to emphasize the truth that the time to get your anchor is before the storm comes. I once stood beside the bed of a dying woman, who had suffered as few mortals are called upon to suffer, and she whispered to me out of her agony: "Tell the people to make sure of their faith in God before their time of trial comes." Ah, yes! After the storm is upon you there is no condition of heart or mind susceptible to the truth. There is a bitterness of heart which rebels at discipline. There is a nourishing of doubt which often makes prayer impossible to the soul that has not already learned to pray. The time to secure your anchor is before your storm comes.

For I have also seen those who have gone through the storm held by this blessed anchor of hope in God through Jesus Christ. I have never

seen one of them come through unscathed. No, not that; they have been maimed or wounded or bleeding; but I have seen them coming out of the hour of grief that benumbs the heart, sustained by a vision of glory; coming out of the hour of temptation and conscious sin with repentance, clinging to the promise of God for cleansing and finding peace; coming out of the hour of disappointment and learning to spell it with a capital H, and making it "His appointment." I have seen them coming with songs of deliverance upon their lips and with the joy of victory in their souls. And do you wonder that their hope in God grows brighter with the years? Do you wonder that as they prove its helpfulness, its comfort, its transforming power, they learn to fix their trust in God, and to say with the apostle, "We are saved by hope"? And do you wonder that they learn to build character not simply for time, but for the eternal years? The eye of faith sees a vision yonder within the veil, and as we learn to hope in Christ for daily help here and now, we learn to repeat those other words of Paul, "Christ in you is the hope of glory."

Oh, friends, have you made sure of this anchor of hope? I beg of you to see to it while it is yet a day of opportunity. Do not make the fatal mistake of waiting until the storm overtakes you. Is it not strange that so many will allow the years to slip by without giving earnest heed to this vital problem of the anchor for the soul? Would you go to sea on a ship which had no anchor? No, you would say that although it may ride the ocean as a thing of life, though it may carry its full quota of cargo, yet the day of storm will surely come, and there are breakers on every coast, and while for many days you might go on as well as any other ship, when the storm actually comes the end will be shipwreck. Yet thousands of men to-day are like so many ships without anchors, because they have never fixed their hope in Christ. Is it because you have never yet experienced a storm of such severity as to sober your thought and quicken your sense of need? Then be sure the day of testing will yet come, the tempest which will stir the troubled waters to such depths as you have never known. If not before, that hour will come when the shadow of death falls. And believe me, nothing but the redemption which is in Jesus Christ will be the sufficient anchor to your soul in that day. But that is sufficient, and that is for you, if you will take it at the hand of God. I beg of you to take Christ to-day, if you have never yet trusted Him as your Saviour, and give your life to Him as your Lord and Master.

You know that our great ships have a number of anchors, but the largest and best is the sheet anchor. Its strength combines that of all the rest. It sinks deeper than any other. It is *the hope* of the ship. Many ordinary duties will be performed by smaller anchors, but one day there comes a demand which nothing else can meet. The days of smooth sailing are gone. Threatening clouds begin to hover ominously on the horizon, and the low rumbling of distant thunder sends warning of the tempest. The laughing waves at first give no sign of danger, but ere long they are running high, and the great ship is tossed from trough to crest, like the foam which the furious sea is lashing about it, and the storm is on. Black night sweeps down and blots out sun and stars from the heavens, and the ship is driven at the mercy of the tempest. Anxious hearts long for the dawn, but with the first gray streaks upon the eastern sky there comes a sound more terrible than the pealing thunder. It is the roar of distant breakers toward which the ship is being driven. With painful heart-throbbings the soundings are made until the lengths of the cable chains are reached. The stream anchor is lowered, but snaps like thread. Little bow anchor, great bow are gone. One hope remains, and the command rings out, "Let go the sheet anchor!" Out it falls limp and listless. It strikes! The stiffening links stand out like a bar of steel! Will it hold? That is the one anxious thought. The mad waves leap up as in a seething caldron, the mighty timbers creak and groan in the fearful struggle: but the sheet anchor grips the eternal rock and holds sure and steadfast, and the ship is saved!

Oh, friends, did you see in that picture the struggle of a storm-tossed soul? No pencil or brush could reproduce the struggle of a storm-tossed soul as it approaches the breakers. But in that struggle there is one sure salvation. It is the sheet-anchor of hope that is fixed in Jesus Christ, the Rock of Ages, the Saviour of the soul unto God.

